

CHAPTER 14

*Literary Authorship in the Digital Age**Adriaan van der Weel*

Throughout the history of text technology, the impetus of innovation has always been the faster production of more texts, to be consumed by more readers. But the effects have never been confined to merely quantitative change. The introduction of new technologies has also inspired new writers to take up the pen, writing about new subjects, inventing new genres and reaching new social strata of readers. This happened after Gutenberg's invention of printing with movable type, when entrepreneurial printers started to cast around for fresh writing to print and sell. It happened again in the nineteenth century after a quick succession of printing innovations made books cheaper and more widely available, leading to such new genres as detective fiction and popular romance. The mass education revolution of the second half of the nineteenth century enabled large groups of the population to emancipate themselves socially and intellectually. Everyone who had a mind to do so could turn to reading for knowledge, culture and entertainment. Thanks to the growing size of the print economy, authorship could become a profession.

Today there is a screen revolution underway, and once again more texts are being produced, to be distributed still faster, to be consumed by yet more readers. And once again more people are writing than ever before in history – writing about new subjects, inventing new genres and reaching new social strata of readers. One of the most fascinating and best-documented cases in recent times to illustrate this is that of E. L. James. Having started her *Fifty Shades* trilogy as web-based fan fiction, James went on in 2011 to self-publish it as an e-book and print-on-demand paperback after there had been complaints about its sexually explicit nature. Snapped up by a commercial publisher, it subsequently turned into one of the greatest publishing successes ever. In August 2013, the trilogy's earnings of \$95 million brought James to the top of the *Forbes* list of highest-earning authors. By June 2015 she had sold over 125 million copies worldwide.

The E. L. James trilogy success story constitutes living proof of the brave new world of egalitarian twenty-first-century publication possibilities. The economic investment in production and distribution required in the case of paper-based self-publishing easily led to it being equated with vanity publishing. Paying for publication was tantamount to blowing one's own trumpet. If James managed to remove that vanity stigma, she was aided in no small measure by one of the unique properties of the digital medium: the ability to keep copying a text endlessly at virtually zero marginal cost means that no investment is required beyond the cost of creating the first copy.

There is much to be said about the phenomenon of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. It may perhaps have made pornography more mainstream than it had already become in the permissive 1960s and 1970s. It may have helped to emancipate its readers, inspiring them to dare to express their fantasies. But in the present connection probably the most interesting question to ask is how – and more precisely, when – E. L. James became a published author. Clearly, she wasn't one when she first put tentative fingers to keyboard to explore her private sexual fantasies. Few would contend that she should be called one today. Whatever we may think the answer to that question should be, it is clear that it would have been a lot harder – if not impossible – for her to rise to the ranks of published authorship without the publication opportunities offered by the digital medium. Desiring to express her fantasies in public is not the same thing as being *able* to do so. But might she even have had that desire: might the thought have occurred to her in a more than desultory way if a fan fiction platform had not been available to her? It is in offering to anyone and everyone the ability to express oneself in public that the digital element can be most truly called revolutionary. Here, *Fifty Shades* represents of course merely the tip of a vast iceberg.

The fascinating thing to observe is that the social consequences of the digital medium, as is always the case with technological innovation, not only extend far beyond the merely quantitative: they are very often not even intended. Indeed, when they first occur they may even be deemed undesirable, for instance because they upset, or threaten to upset, established social power relations. These social effects are so insidious precisely because they are unintended: we are rarely aware of them before they have taken effect. This is exactly what is happening now in the case of the current screen revolution. Even as today we find ourselves still in the midst of an ongoing transformation, it is only natural that we should wish to understand the nature of the changes. But what we should really aim for is to understand their *implications*. When attempting to understand and

explain the mechanisms underlying these bewildering contemporary developments, it is helpful to take a longer historical perspective so as to avoid the disorienting feeling of being caught up as observers in the rapidly moving stream of current events.

From the first discovery of the power of writing, the concept of authorship, along with that of readership – and even literacy – has been repeatedly transformed and redefined. The twenty-first-century screen revolution is once again bringing home just how historically contingent such concepts actually are. The paper world is essentially hierarchical and top-down. Only the privileged have access to print to reply to anything they have read. Others are confined to making approving or disapproving notes in the margins of their reading. Online, the author–reader relationship essentially swivels by 90 degrees to become horizontal and “democratic.” But in the meantime, the hierarchical print world with all its access barriers has not vanished. Since it is almost impossible to maintain a clear demarcation between notions of pre-digital authorship and digital writing practices, and since both occur in parallel in our hybrid analog–digital media world, this is effectively setting adrift the concept of authorship in its entirety.

In this hybrid world, all of the conventional publication channels are still in operation, even if the output is no longer confined to paper products. The majority of books are still sold in their familiar paper form, though they are increasingly complemented by e-books. But no doubt as a consequence of their more ephemeral nature, a large number of newspapers have migrated to Web-only publication, though many follow a hybrid paper–digital strategy. In addition to these existing, let us call them formal, publishing outlets, however, the Web offers new and widely accessible opportunities for the public expression of ideas hovering between the formal and the informal in countless shades of grey.

Self-publishing actually so called is available, both in paper and digital forms, from platforms such as Lulu, Blurb, Kobo (Writing Life), or Amazon (Kindle Direct). A multitude of Web and app-based opportunities to make one’s writings public are also offered by, for example, Wattpad; www.xianxiaworld.net (Chinese fantasy); archiveofourown.org or fanfiction.net. Fanfiction.net is where E. L. James, disguised as “Snowqueen’s Icedragon,” started to write off her midlife crisis in what was to become the *Fifty Shades* trilogy. In the process she launched herself, almost accidentally, into a career as an author. Online, one does not necessarily have to think of oneself as a writer to be able to share one’s thoughts and opinions with a wider readership. Web 2.0-based social media such as Facebook, Reddit, WhatsApp or Tumblr have so far

democratized the means of publication that the most ephemeral utterances may now be communicated on public platforms. In the Web 2.0 environment absolutely everything is geared – socially and technologically – toward making it easy for readers to contribute to the conversation. It is hard to imagine a more level field for author and reader to meet. Indeed, one may well wonder how their roles may be distinguished. E. L. James, we may recall, set out on her writing career as a reader – and a very devoted one at that – as a fan of the *Twilight* vampire series by Stephenie Meyer.

What makes the evolution of this democratized online writing environment especially fascinating is the extent to which the social impetus and the technological impetus are intertwined. On the technology side, there is the history of the Internet and the World Wide Web: the history of how electronic text forms came to be produced, distributed and consumed on a global network of digital screens. Digital technology has come with a range of inherent properties, from the infinite and lossless copyability of digital files, already mentioned, to their machine readability, multimodality and ultimate fluidity. Thus, digital technology made a perfect match with an ideological drive toward “free knowledge,” succinctly expressed in the countercultural slogan “information wants to be free.” This in turn must be understood in the context of the Internet’s origin in the secluded, even rarefied, environment of the military and academic communities, in both of which the profit motive was markedly absent. Contrary to the cut-and-paste techniques used in the analog print production process, the truly revolutionary copy-and-paste potential of the digital environment was actually able to deliver on that oft-repeated rallying cry.

At roughly the same time, there was also a strong impetus toward “liberation” of the reader from the “dictates of a tyrannical author.” The poststructuralist disposition to deprecate the author’s authority stands out in particular. In their various ways, Barthes, Foucault and Derrida had long been skeptical of authorial authority. Going back a little further, that poststructuralist stance, incidentally, may itself well have been a response to the modernist sensibility, which asserted the author’s position as a member of an intellectual elite – while modernism in its turn had been, at least in part, a reaction to the much feared and much derided democratization and vulgarization of reading in the mass education revolution of the second half of the nineteenth century that we already encountered earlier.¹

In the early 1990s, a group of influential American academics became fascinated by hypertext as a promising technology to help undermine the author’s power. Following the lead of Barthes and the other French

poststructuralist theorists, they seized on hypertext as the technological implementation of the theoretical notion of the readerly literary text. The term “hypertext” had been coined by Theodor Nelson in the 1960s, but the technology’s concept had many fathers, also including Vannevar Bush, Andries van Dam, and Douglas Engelbart. What they shared was a deep motivation to empower the reader as the user of an information system. As one of the academics who recognized hypertext’s potential early on, Jay David Bolter, astutely remarks in *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing* (1991), the New Criticism – itself a distinctly Modernist phenomenon – had been squarely based on fixity as an inherent property of the printed text, “self-sufficient, perfect, and untouchable” (149). Similarly, he goes on to note, “[n]ot only the reader-response and spatial-form but even the most radical theorists (Barthes, de Man, Derrida, and their American followers) speak a language that is strikingly appropriate to electronic writing” (161).

Bolter was perhaps the first to be struck by the remarkable parallels between French critical theory and American digital technology. But it was George Landow who explored this notion most fully, in his *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (1992). More than Bolter, Landow seemed to exult in the opportunity technology held out to him to dance on the author’s grave. The last section of *Hypertext*, entitled “The Politics of Hypertext: Who Controls the Text?”, celebrates the reader’s liberation from all unwarranted yet institutionalized exercise of power. There are unmistakable overtones here of the Marxist notion that the socialist revolution would eventually bring the means of production under the control of the people. The belief in the advent of a new era of liberation in which the consumer would achieve complete hegemony over the text by taking full control of its production has a similarly religious tinge to it.

The historical irony is that the prophets turned out to be right, only not in the way they had envisaged. Yes, hypertext did indeed go on to become a great success. In the form of HTML, it has seen a tremendously popular implementation on the WWW, instigated by Tim Berners Lee in 1990. Hyperlinking turned out to be perfectly suited to the Internet’s inherent property of two-directionality on which its client-server architecture was based from its inception. Given the current popularity of the Web, the hypertextual transformation of our textual world could thus be said to have been more thorough than even Landow, for all his revolutionary ideology, foresaw. However, it left the way literary fiction was written and read – the central focus of the fervid American theorizing of the early 1990s – almost

entirely untouched. Not only has it done remarkably little to inspire authors' literary imagination, from their side, readers too have shown hardly any interest in electronic literature.² Whether discouraged by its cold reception or because of their own lack of enthusiasm, few serious authors ever bothered to explore hypertext's potential. Today the Electronic Literature Organization maintains a small and languishing presence on the Web.

That the history of hypertext is also that of a failed political project of denigrating the author's role does not mean, however, that democratization of authorship has not in fact happened. It just happened differently from how the theorists predicted it would. More importantly than professional authors ceding to the reader a significant portion of their authorial power (notably the final responsibility for the narrative that the theorists coveted so much), the newly empowered readers have seized the opportunity provided by technology to be in even fuller control. They elevated themselves to the rank of published authors. This technology was not just hypertext per se. Crucially, the technology that readers adopted with unprecedented speed and enthusiasm was that of Web 2.0, from 2006. Hypertext may have been designed to place the existing, conventional author–reader relationship on a more equal footing, but it wasn't enough. Authorship still required access to the means of production – a server connected to the Internet. It was Web 2.0, incidentally making grateful use of hypertext technology, that enabled the person formerly known as the reader to morph into a “wreader” or “prosumer.” Now anyone with an Internet connection could truly be a published author.

Social attitudes to authorship and textuality on the one hand and revolutionary digital technology on the other jointly made for a heady, not to say explosive mixture. It gave rise, for example, to the ethic that now goes by the name of “remixing.” This started as a rather subversive practice in a pioneering spirit, but once Creative Commons licensing took care of legalities it went on to flourish in the mainstream. Creative Commons must therefore not just be understood as the attempt it certainly also was to bring copyright into the networked world of the twenty-first century. Creative Commons was also emphatically intended as a way of breaking down existing barriers to the reuse of creative expressions that would be protected and reserved under conventional copyright paradigms. Creative Commons licensing was and still is the ready solution for those who wish on principle to refrain from exploiting their intellectual property rights, not seeking monetary remuneration but expressly wishing to share with other makers around the globe.

The complex socio-technical process we have just observed at work in the example of hypertext leads to the observation that effects were only partly planned. While a more equitable relationship between author and reader was a conscious aim, the explosion of public online writing in the Web 2.0 arena today was neither planned nor foreseen. Even Mark Zuckerberg could not have predicted just how much intimate information people could be enticed to divulge online about themselves and the vicissitudes of their daily lives. For all that it was unplanned, though, this explosion of writing has managed to upset one of the core elements of the conventional notion of authorship. At least for the last hundred and fifty years, authorship has been closely tied up with publication. Publication was distinctive precisely because it was not available to all and sundry. Once achieved, publication could become a source of prestige, be it economic or symbolic (or a combination) – based on copyright and later intellectual property right (see Alexis Easley’s chapter “The Nineteenth Century” and Daniel Cook’s chapter “Copyright and Literary Property” in this volume). In the digital domain, by contrast, professional authors rub shoulders with rank amateurs. An important mark of distinction has thus largely fallen away, blurring the boundaries between authorship and “mere” writing.

Given Web 2.0 affordances, “publication” (as in “making public”) is becoming contested as an adequate criterion for authorship. The resulting digital confusion has led to a frantic search for new certainties, for example by tightening the definition of authorship. There is a scramble for reasons – whether quantitative or qualitative – to exclude from the criteria for authorship the act of making public through “mere” social media. In an attempt to close the digital sluice gates, it has also been suggested that a text cannot properly be called published unless it has been “read” a given number of times.³ However understandable the impulse to stem the massive and fast-moving tide of change and by any means instill order in the chaos, any such criteria would amount to no more than stop-gap measures. Rather than attempting new definitions, at this stage it may be more helpful to try and understand more fully the mechanism of socio-technical change that we already saw illustrated in the case of hypertext. What we need to account for is how technology, once employed, always delivers more than it was consciously designed to deliver. Such unlooked-for social side effects tend to be more diffuse than the deliberately sought direct quantitative effects, but not less pervasive for that.

As has become clear by now, this mechanism is not unique to digital technology, let alone to the case of hypertext. All major technological

milestones in text production, such as printing with individual movable type in the fifteenth century, the mechanization of print production in the nineteenth, and now digital text forms were consciously looking to achieve immediate quantitative effects – more texts, faster and more convenient multiplication, more readers. Not surprisingly, from the outset it was one of the frequently voiced laments about the printing press that it caused a deluge of books to be read. The Web has met with exactly the same criticism. Information overload is a timeless concern. Yet these same technological milestones have also been followed at a distance by other, more diffuse but pervasive social consequences: for the type of writing being produced, for the economic position of the author, and for the social role and status of the author. With every technological innovation, reading and literacy have gained a more central place in society. The challenge is to establish a convincing link between the immediate and desired – usually primarily quantitative – effects and the longer-term, unintended, social consequences.

Many critics have been at pains to dismiss McLuhan's apodictic pronouncements of the 1960s about the power of the medium to affect the nature and content of the message. How, the rhetorical question goes, could a mere technology, created and controlled by humans, constitute an active force in its own right? But rather than taking the question as rhetorical, it makes sense to try and answer it seriously. Elsewhere I have suggested that technology can constitute a shaping force on how we act and even think without any human intention or forethought through the mechanism of technological properties and their affordances.⁴ Thus the fluidity of digital text enables, as we have seen, remixing and copy-and-pasting. The same property allows the verbal message to remain always computable under the surface shown on the screen.⁵ Similarly, the fact that all media and modalities (or data types) are computable on the same screen space comes with the affordance of being able to make messages multi-medial as easily as they can be just textual. Another particularly salient example is the Web's two-directional infrastructure (based in the original client-server architecture of the Internet). Among the many relevant affordances of this salient property is the constellation of web practices that we have already encountered under its popular appellation Web 2.0. Powering the concept of social media, Web 2.0 in its turn is the chief digital development responsible for the unbridled increase in the quantity of published texts.

Crucially, these affordances do not fully derive from conscious and deliberate initial invention. The Web 2.0 affordance of the Internet's two-

directional architecture, for example, was not immediately apparent, but was *discovered* in a slow socio-technical process. Yet it is part of the constellation of affordances that shape the authorial message as well as the social position of authors in all sorts of subtle and not so subtle ways. The medium – always a technology – is never neutral, but always affects the content of the message. In other words, the socio-technical environment in which authors work strongly affects the nature and social position of their authorship. Phrased differently, the social position of authorship is always founded in a particular socio-technical constellation of a particular dominant technology for the dissemination of texts and the particular literate mentality it engenders. Let's survey some of the notable social consequences of the current, digital, constellation and describe them more fully.

For the first time in history, technology is offering to make “wreader-ship” available to all and sundry. That is to say that anyone can make public one's own writing, but equally that it has never been easier to appropriate and repurpose the writings of others. To begin with the latter, this has raised more than a few eyebrows, and led some to ask the question who is in charge? As Frank Rose has observed, “[i]n a command-and-control world, we know who's telling the story; it's the author. But digital media have created an authorship crisis. Once the audience is free to step out of the fiction and start directing events, the entire edifice of twentieth-century mass media begins to crumble.”⁶ When John Updike, in 2006, responded with horror to Kevin Kelly's vision of a digital library to eclipse all previous attempts to collect the world's knowledge and culture, it was not the scope of Kelly's ambition that he objected to but the implications of the blatant shift in power distribution that it represented. Underneath the strident tone of his writing, it is not hard to detect a note of a certain aggrieved powerlessness. Updike feels the victim, if not of technology, then at least of the unfamiliar mindset – alien even – fostered by digital technology. Updike considers himself a professional author who relies on his writing for an income. Yet here were upstarts and amateurs claiming the right to consider his work fair game for “remixing.” One gets the sense that he felt almost humiliated by mere readers encroaching on his, the writer's, territory. The two sides of remixing are pride that someone thinks highly enough of one's work versus the ignominy that one's work is apparently not valued enough in its original form.⁷

Of course, appropriation of the authorial text by the reader has happened throughout all times. As the French critics we encountered earlier have long claimed, readers have always made an active contribution to the communication process, regardless of medium. Another French critic,

Michel de Certeau, referred to this as the reader acting as a nomad, “poaching” the writer’s game.⁸ This is not just a matter of readers being whimsical and wayward in their interpretation. A lifetime of reading inevitably amounts to “bricolage.” The point is not just that it is always the reader who makes the final decision about what to read, but that the meaning derived from the reading depends to such a large extent on the accidental context. Choice may be limited in the compulsory part of one’s education, but once that has been completed, there are no more normative expectations. In the absence of a reading “program” for life, each reader’s reading comes eventually to resemble a patchwork quilt, with each quilt being the outcome of a unique set of reading experiences. The greater the choice and the smaller the units, the patchier the quilt.

Appropriation, then, is not a new phenomenon, but digital technology adds an array of further possibilities – if not incentives – to recalibrate the power balance between author and reader. By constantly presenting fresh menus and new links, leading to any number of (frequently short) texts, the Web has only added to the fragmentation and patchiness of reading. Hypertext, in the original narrow sense envisaged by Nelson, extends the readers’ power to make final decisions even within the individual unitary text. Especially copying-and-pasting, remixing, fan-fiction and so on are explicit expressions of appropriation facilitated in the digital realm. The more power the reader is offered, or arrogates to him- or herself – thus the more active the reader is as an agent in the process – the more responsible he or she becomes for its outcome, as a corollary diminishing the author’s role.

But the conflict between authors’ and readers’ interests has, perhaps paradoxically, been intensified most by Web 2.0 and its utter democratization of access to the means of publication. While it is easy to see how remixing or otherwise repurposing materials written by others – in particular by “professional authors” – can be constructed as an attack or invasion, online technology does not just make it easy to borrow or steal, but offers new power to write publicly. This power is widely and greedily embraced. Though no reliable figures exist, it is likely that more people than ever before in history are now recording their thoughts in words to share them with the world. The very ease with which the upstarts can make their voice heard in public has been widely decried by professional authors, journalists, and cultural critics of all stripes.⁹ Particularly the fact that professional and dilettante authors may mingle in the same screen-space is hard to accept. Instead of the solidity of, say, a hardcover book, the only marks of distinction available there are virtual, such as a different Web address.

One of the supposedly deleterious effects of this has been called “the cult of the amateur.”¹⁰ It has been often remarked that in the unrestricted online publication environment there are no quality barriers.¹¹ There is indeed what Eugene Volokh has called a “cheap speech” effect.¹² With a great deal of foresight, Volokh saw the Web’s fabulous potential for solving “media scarcity,” giving consumers greater choice of what to see, watch or hear. What Volokh did not (could not) foresee, though, was the unintended consequence of the democratization represented by the Web which he had then only observed in its 1.0 form. Once Web 2.0 appeared on the scene, it started hollowing out many writing professions – most notably journalism – to an extent that it began in effect to pose a threat to democracy.¹³ This may serve as a grim example of a side effect that is not just unintended but undesirable.

One cannot help but surmise that the intensification of appropriation and the democratization of the means of publication can only serve in the longer run to diminish the authority of authorship. But this power shift has economic implications, too. The competition for earnings, deriving from readers as buyers, increases. This applies to actual income, but even if no money should flow into the pockets of the upstarts, indirectly any competition for attention – for which read “valuable reading time” – potentially detracts from an author’s earning capacity. Exploitation of the affordances of the printing press enabled patronage of the wealthy elite to be replaced with patronage by the consumer. Successful authors like Charles Dickens managed to establish a direct economic relationship between the author and his public. Just as the printing revolution of the nineteenth century caused intellectual property right to become the chief factor in the professionalization of authorship, so the screen revolution may well turn out to be a similar harbinger of major economic change, but this time in the reverse direction, away from professionalization. To add injury to insult, not only does status and attention get siphoned off but digital value is lower, too. Authors’ earning capacity is under severe strain as a result of the competition for attention by amateurs.

Another characteristic of the online publication environment is that the bulk of everything that is written there is made public by default. Humans have been called the storytelling species. We like to tell stories to make sense of the world as it presents itself to us. We can do so privately, using words and writing as tools to help us think, or to share our doubts and convictions, our feelings and emotions with a friend. We can also, for any number of reasons, seek a public audience for our writings. As we have found, this distinction is one of the chief casualties of the increasing

digitization of our daily lives. Technology, especially in the shape of Web 2.0, has enabled almost frictionless ways of making text public. The effect that is most notable in the present context has been the creation of a vast gray area of “authorship” where writing is made public that would have remained private under a paper dispensation. There have always been manuscripts languishing in drawers; there have always been diaries that were not intended for public consumption. Now, partly perhaps from an intrinsic desire to assert one’s opinions in public, but probably especially as a result of the social pressure to join in the opportunities offered by the new technological facilities, more and more of these previously private writings are becoming public.

The Web is a virtually unregulated and uncensored, minimally semi-public but always potentially fully public space. Messages intended as private, and conveyed in the closed sphere of, for example, email or texts can be easily made public at any time. If texts are *not* to be made public, or *not* to be made copyable, this requires resorting to special measures, such as locking them behind paywalls or using Digital Rights Management (DRM). With texts thus becoming public by default, the barrier between public and private threatens to vanish. Indeed, in the digital world people appear to experience little tension between the public nature of the Web and the private and ephemeral nature of much of their writings. From the perspective of the Order of the Book¹⁴ – that is, from a paper-based perspective – we can only conclude that the Web environment represents a very different mindset. To the paper-formed mind, the fact that there are no editors, publishers, booksellers, librarians to curtail one’s liberty to share anything publicly online would, depending on one’s ideological bent, either call for responsibility and restraint or be experienced as a relief from oppressive forces impeding the free flow of information. But the Web-formed mind, not recognizing the distinction between public and private, appears neither to see any need for responsibility or restraint nor to think very hard about the status quo as representing freedom newly gained.

Essentially this is no different from the cultural clash that occurred between Socrates’ perspective on writing, decisively shaped by the chiefly oral society in which he grew up, and the perspective of those who believed in the power of that new-fangled medium. According to Plato, one of the chief complaints that Socrates had about writing was that once words are set down they are on their own, left to their own devices, without support from their “father,” the author. That, once made public, a text ceases to be under the author’s control is not an issue to the digital mind. A new medium fosters a new and very different mindset and new writing

conventions. In a hybrid world, it takes time for new habits, formed to suit new and unique inherent technological properties, to become accepted as conventions.

With the unbridled increase in volume, the range of writing being made public broadens significantly in terms of genres and concerns. The less economic investment is required for the act of making public, the lower the bar in terms of urgency. A whole unsuspected range of subjects that would never have moved anyone to set pen to paper for the purpose of public consumption is now brought into the light of day. Facebook timelines filled with a record of the ephemeral minutiae of people's private lives, fan-fiction, blogs and the Trump tweet: they are all entirely new genres of writing made public.

Not only in terms of subject matter but also as a result of the medium's natural fluidity, such texts on screen are experienced as more ephemeral. Digital texts are fleeting presences on a screen, here today and gone tomorrow. This does not of course do much for the style or precision of the textual expression. In Plato's time, the demands made by the public nature of an utterance set down in writing were not self-evident. David Olson has explained how writers have had to learn over time to take greater responsibility for the reader's understanding of their texts.¹⁵ This caused authors to take greater care in expressing themselves. It would appear that the digital medium is reversing that trend. The more ephemeral the posting, the less polishing appears to be called for. Neither readers nor authors appear to take digital texts as seriously as they tend to do texts on paper across the board.¹⁶ Paradoxically the sense of ephemerality coincides with the experience that texts may persist for a much longer period than their authors expected or might, at second thought, consider desirable – again emphasizing the lack of authorial control over a text once it has been made public. The finding that texts online are experienced as ephemeral and not to be taken very seriously may also be linked to the oft-lamented tendency toward more fragmented reading habits. In a vicious spiral, authors are often reminded that brevity and publication in easily digestible chunks are the appropriate strategy to deal with the shortening of readers' attention spans.

Another answer to shortening attention spans, incidentally, is to avoid text and the effort of reading involved altogether. Technologically speaking, it is easier than ever to take recourse to other modalities than text. In the personal sphere of one-to-one communication and social media, a tendency to use photos, short films and spoken messages instead of text can indeed be discerned. When it comes to books, there has been greater

reserve. There was a brief time when the CEOs of large publishing companies could be heard to declare that e-books that were no more than digitized paper books were “dead.” The future was supposed to belong to so-called “enhanced” or “enriched” books. However, in spite of the amount of experimentation that has taken place, lately for example with augmented reality, the oft-proclaimed enhanced book revolution has yet to take place. Authors have been no more eager to embrace multimodal authorship than they were to experiment with hypertext.

We can only speculate about the reasons for this lack of enthusiasm, but it does not seem too far-fetched to surmise that one significant factor may be the very different skill-set required. In the book industry as a “content industry” the boundaries are fluid in principle. Yet the conceptual shift involved in the enhancement of books may be a bridge too far. Multimodality is easily associated with gaming, and so may be too much at variance with the familiar concept of the book. By dint of its long history, this is still preponderantly textual, with illustrations thrown in as occasion demands. Certainly, the digital nature of such hybrid products would provide a technological challenge not just to authors but to all players in the book chain, which is still largely analog. Interestingly, there are actually signs of a reverse trend in which the offline nature of (print) books has started to become part of the appeal of reading. The text-only character of the conventional book may continue, at least for the time being, to offer readers a welcome respite from the digital – and in particular the online – onslaught. If this trend to find ways to escape from the screen world persists, it looks like the creation of fully textual universes to be consumed offline may be becoming a strength rather than a weakness of authors of a more conventional breed.

Diametrically opposed to this stand those who maintain that the paper book is in serious danger of being increasingly marginalized in the larger digital media arena and have high expectations of more multimodal expression. They like to hammer on the argument that, led by the media, the world is becoming increasingly digital. It is just a matter of time before books, too, will be forced to follow the path to the future and to submit ineluctably to the dictates of the digital. In this perspective, e-books have the future, but they still need to come into their own. Coming into their own means obeying the inherent properties of the digital element. In the hybrid world of books, competing pressures are now strongly felt by all parties involved: authors as well as their readers and the publishing industry. There is a great deal of uncertainty and it is

impossible to predict which scenario has the greatest likelihood of coming about. But there are some observations we can make.

If we regard the authorship-production-distribution-consumption chain from a longer historical perspective, authorship, though the first link in the chain, is the last link to be “democratized” with the arrival in the twenty-first century of Web 2.0. In neat biblical symmetry, the last – consumption (reading) – was democratized first, in the nineteenth century. In the intervening period, the means of production went through a slower process, starting in the twentieth century with offset lithography, mimeographing and photocopying and continuing with the same digital revolution in the twentieth century that also revolutionized distribution through the Internet and the Web in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While the longer-term consequences may still need to become clear, where the changes that the digital world has brought so far clearly converge is in the way they are affecting the social position of the author and the prestige of authorship. Taken together, in the hybrid digital–analog world of authorship the quantitative explosion, followed by a whole range of more indirect social changes, leads *ipso facto* to a devaluation of that prestige. Social effects like these are so powerful precisely because they are unintended.

Is there any redress? Or are there ultimately limits to the power of the democratized author that there are not for professional authors: platform restrictions? Could the level of control over the form and distribution of one’s writings be a decisive factor in a definition of authorship in the digital era? Could we say that it is the possibility to escape restriction that constitutes the essential distinction between amateur and professional authors?

Whether evaded or overcome, these restrictions show the intimate connection of authorship with (economic) power. Only “real” authors have access to that exclusive print world where some form of restrictions still hold. Might it be – however paradoxically and in spite of all orthodoxies about the democratization of the means of publication – the very restrictions of that print world that both authors and readers continue to seek?

Can we – should we – redefine authorship in some way? Can we – should we – exclude certain categories of writers from authorship? We have already observed that the public *versus* private nature of writing fails to be a usable criterion. However, aren’t there plenty of other conventional formal criteria: membership of authors’ societies; publication contracts; remuneration; ISBNs; a form of selection, for example by a “recognized” publisher? None of these would seem to do full justice to the E. L. James case that we started out with. Isn’t the point that we cannot continue to judge the digital with the criteria from the analog world? Given the current

hybridity of authorship, aren't the boundaries permeable by definition? What is more to the point is that, given the nature of the digital revolution, none of those criteria would do anything to alter the changing *perception* of authorship.

The same applies to the distinction between "real" and – what, "pretend"? – authorship in our digital world. No criterion is going to stop the concept of authorship from being unstable – from the perspective of the Order of the Book, that is. Ultimately, it may come down less to the question of whether it is tenable to make a distinction than to the question of whether it is necessary or even desirable to do so. What purpose would it serve? It is only useful (if useful is indeed the word) as a label for critics and academics to wield. It may be more realistic to accept that confusion simply comes with the digital territory. We may thus need to prepare for the slow but inexorable hollowing out of the existing concept of authorship. But for whom is that a problem?

Notes

1. One need only think of Nietzsche's, Flaubert's, D. H. Lawrence's or Huxley's often voiced distaste for the mass literacy made possible by education and the printing press.
2. See Anne Mangen and Adriaan van der Weel, "Why Don't We Read Hypertext Novels?," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 23.2 (2017), 166–81.
3. Denis G. Pelli and Charles Bigelow, "A Writing Revolution," *Seed Magazine*, 20 October 2009, http://seedmagazine.com/content/article/a_writing_revolution/
4. In my book Adriaan van der Weel, *Changing our Textual Minds* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2011), but see also Adriaan van der Weel, "Pandora's Box of Text Technology," *Jaarboek voor Nederlandse Boekgeschiedenis*, 20 (2013), 201–4. As far as the agency of inanimate subjects is concerned, compare also for example the Actor-Network Theory (ANT) perspective (of Bruno Latour and others), and the embodied-cognition perspective of Lambros Malafouris, *How Things Shape the Mind: A Theory of Material Engagement* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013).
5. See Adriaan van der Weel, "Feeding our Reading Machines: From the Typographic Page to the Docuverse," in "Beyond Accessibility: Textual Studies in the Twenty-First Century", eds. Brent Nelson and Richard Cunningham, *Digital Studies / Le champ numérique*, 6 (2015–16), DOI: <http://doi.org/10.16995/dscn.15>
6. Frank Rose, *The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories* (New York: Norton, 2011), p. 83.